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ABSTRACT

Teachers often view basic writers as manifestations of three different problems: problems with usage forms, problems with discourse forms, and problems with thought. The first type consists of problems of standard versus nonstandard English usage, and is concerned with error. Others see basic writers' problems as ones of discourse forms and conventions. This view would remediate basic writers by teaching them to emulate models of discourse. A third view of writers suggests that they need to assume different ways of thinking, of examining problems. But basic writers can think in any way which is appropriate for their situation. The same intellectual skills which served them in an inner-city neighborhood or rural farming community can serve them in an academic community. They do, however, need to learn to translate their thought from outside-the-academy views to inside-the-academy views. Teachers need to establish connections between these disparate subcultures in order to translate between levels of intensity within the areas of commitment. This translation can be facilitated through more extensive use of peer groups in the basic writing class. Through peer interaction, basic writers begin to understand that good writing allows members of one subculture, of one discourse community, to communicate with members of others. (MM)

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Negotiating Basic Writing Subcultures:
Each of Us Is Alike in our Differences

The first day of the semester, I never feel as if I have anything in common with the students in basic writing, as if I don't understand their views of the world, as if I don't know how to communicate with them, or how to help each of them communicate with the others. I have to learn from them as much or more than they have to learn from me. If I can understand the relationships between each student's culture and the traditional academic culture--my culture--I can do much to ease the transitions basic writers are forced to make when they come to college.

In this paper, then, I'd like to do three things: introduce a few basic writers from one of my recent classes; talk about traditional ways of viewing their difficulties and why I think those views are problematic; and offer a perspective for viewing their cultures.

The Students

Eighty percent deaf, Alicia said, "I can hear noises and tones, but I can't tell words if I can't see your face." Alicia chose to write about her favorite vacation, the most fun she ever had, what she was planning for spring break. Her attendance at basketball games was much more consistent than her attendance in class. A cheerleader and a sorority member, Alicia identified strongly with the collegiate peer culture, students involved with football, breaks, dates, and fun.

Derek, an inner-city, southern black, taught me an intricate, four-stage handshake. He taught me the rules of Rap and Dozens. I learned how to read Derek's rap-written papers which were focused on topics he knew intimately: family, survival, basketball; he preferred to write in a non-conformist language, to refer to nonconformist ideas. Members of this nonconformist peer culture are idea oriented, but in a non-traditional, perhaps nonacademic sense. They are attached to learning, but not particularly to the college.

Janel, from a small rural town, said "I talk funny. I know that because my teachers always made fun of the way I talked. I want to be a teacher to make it even. I'll never make fun of anyone." Janel was never particularly attached to the college, seeing it only as a means to an end, a sort of assembly plant. Many of her writings focused on her early educational experiences and on her career goals. Janel represented a vocational culture which is interested in off-the-job training and the necessary diploma.

James an Air Force veteran, already looked like the hospital administrator he hoped to become. "I've fooled around and wasted time," he said. He worked hard, exceeding all minimum requirements. James usually wrote about his "awakening"; he was the only member of the class who used the library to research writing topics. Because he had learned from his experience, James was more in line with a traditional academic subculture than any other student in the class.

The Traditional View

Usually, we think of basic writers as the manifestations of their three different types of problems: problems with usage forms, problems with discourse forms, and problems with thought.

The first type consists of problems of standard versus nonstandard English usage. This concept is concerned with error. It usually sees students as "deficient," in need of "remediation." But when I look at the students in basic writing, I don't see individuals who are deficient. Their language use is certainly non-standard, but it is also colorful and articulate, genuine and personal. Janel may talk "funny," as she says, but she also talks with unique and effective rhythms, phrasings, and vocabulary.

I see these students more as aliens. They are not trying to learn a different language, as someone who has never spoken would. They are simply trying to translate their ideas into an academic community language. Instead of teaching these basic writers how to "fix" their language, we need to help them understand how to translate their thoughts from a language appropriate to their native subculture into a language appropriate for the academic/professional subculture.

Others see basic writers' problems more as ones of discourse forms and conventions. This view, too, is familiar. It would have us teach forms and patterns, perhaps even "modes of discourse." It would have our basic writers examine model

pieces in prose readers and seek to emulate those models. It would make parrots of us all. But Derek's Dozens--rap forms which consist of twelve variably rhythmed rhyming couplets--represent forms which are as complex and variable as more standard academic forms, such as comparison/contrast schemes. Again, I prefer to see basic writers as needing to understand something of translation, changing their familiar forms to ones more comfortable to members of other subcultures. Derek came to basic writing with the capability of differentiating between discourse forms and conventions: He knew immediately that I did not understand his discourse conventions, and he stayed after class to explain to me the rules, forms, and conventions of his discourse. Eventually, he learned how to translate his Rap-written rough drafts into more academic forms.

A third view of basic writers suggests that they need to assume different ways of thinking, of examining problems. According to this view, what we need to teach students about writing has to do with thought itself. These theorists claim that students cannot think in the complex ways which reflect an educated world view. But basic writers can, I believe, think in any way which is appropriate for their situation. Janel, for example, can successfully and appropriately argue for a student's right to her own language even though she has never even heard of sociolinguistic theory. Any of these basic writers could construct complex statements specifying

the importance of college for members of non-academic communities. No matter how sophisticated the logic and articulation, however, their thoughts would be dismissed by many inside the academy because the students' reference points would all come from outside.

Again, I disagree with this view. Basic writers, I believe, do not need to learn to think, or even to learn to think in different ways. The same intellectual skills which have served them in an inner-city neighborhood or a rural farming community can serve them in an academic community.

Basic writers, therefore, are capable individuals when they come to college: they already think relative, committed thoughts; they already express their thoughts in complex forms and systems; they already use language in sophisticated, personal ways. They do, however, need to learn to translate their thoughts from outside-the-academy views to inside-the-academy views. It is less a difference of thought or form than it is a difference of view-points. Basic writers differ from other writers only in the level to which they have learned to translate their own languages, conventions, and world views into those of the academy. We do not need to "remediate" anyone, to teach them new discourse forms, or even to "change" their world view; we need only to show students what they already know and help them translate that knowledge onto an academically oriented schema.

An Alternative View

Earlier, when I have referred to various subcultures, I relied on Burtin Clark and Martin Trow's schema for differentiating between conflicting peer cultures. According to the schema, students' life experiences before college dictate the students' material, moral, intellectual, cultural, and emotional characteristics. "These orientations appear as shared notions of what constitutes right attitude and action toward the range of issues and experiences confronted in college" (19). The students' subcultures, then, are creating their orientations toward other cultures and toward college itself.

Clark and Trow intended their schema as a heuristic for understanding how social structures shape students' lives in college (19), and there are, of course, problems with neatly categorizing students. While each student tends to belong primarily to one category, there is much crossing over. Each student has a few dominant characteristics of one particular culture, but each also borrows from the other peer cultures. Therefore, I devised a grid system for charting each student's involvement with distinct areas of allegiance and for traditional academia's involvement with those same areas.

ALICIA	high	medium	low
Idea Involvement--Traditional			X
Institutional Attachment	X		
Idea Involvement--Nontraditional		X	
Vocational Committment			X

DEREK	high	medium	low
Idea Involvement--Traditional			X
Institutional Attachment		X	
Idea Involvement--Nontraditional	X		
Vocational Committment		X	

JANEL	high	medium	low
Idea Involvement--Traditional		X	
Institutional Attachment		X	
Idea Involvement--Nontraditional		X	
Vocational Committment	X		

JAMES	high	medium	low
Idea Involvement--Traditional	X		
Institutional Attachment		X	
Idea Involvement--Nontraditional			X
Vocational Committment		X	

LIBERAL ARTS ACADEMIA	high	medium	low
Idea Involvement--Traditional	X		
Institutional Attachment	X		
Idea Involvement--Nontraditional		X	
Vocational Committment			X

Obviously, the traditional liberal arts are more concerned with some areas than others, just as basic writers are. But there is a more important implication to these grids: All the basic writers share areas of attachment with the academic world, but they do not share degrees of attachment with that world or with each other.

Thus, as I have already argued, basic writers do not need remediation or change, they need to translate the orientations

they already have--those characteristics depicted on the grids--so that they translate their degrees of commitment to the academy's degrees of commitment.

What we need to establish, then, are connections, bridges between these disparate subcultures in order to translate between the levels of intensity within the areas of commitment. In some cases, as with James, these bridges between the student and the academy could probably be easily constructed.

In other situations, however, this bridging could become more difficult as the number of correlate commitments decreases; I am, for example, no more a member of Janel's community than she is of mine. To facilitate this academic translation, we must understand the language and the commitments of both basic writers and the academy.

Basic writers, then, are trying to make certain moves between discourse communities, to desire the things of another community or culture. But that does not mean they want to abandon old communities and old things. And, as teachers of basic writing, we don't have to demand they change or abandon as part of their movement; we need only help them learn to translate, show them how to build on their knowledge of their own communities. This transition between communities, therefore, can best be facilitated by helping students understand the differences between their areas and degrees of

committment and those of the academy, and then by helping them translate between the two communities.

How do we facilitate this translation? Primarily though more extensive use of peer groups in the basic writing class. The groups offer students the natural opportunity to express their beliefs; the groups also force students to translate their beliefs so that members of other communities can understand. Often, I'm afraid, a basic writer doesn't stop to consider that her topic, which seems so familiar, will be completely unfamiliar to members of other communities. Peer groups can help head off this cultural mismatching before it occurs. These groups can function in at least three ways.

First, peer groups can be used extensively during prewriting. By discussing ideas before writing about them, students from different subcultures can help each other anticipate the comprehension problems readers from different subcultures might have and help the writers consider translation strategies. Alicia and Janel, for example, could work together to anticipate the problems a deaf reader would have in understanding accent and vernacular differences.

Second, peer groups can actually compose pieces together. Pairs of writers, representing different discourse communities, could be given a writing task which requires discussing an aspect of one subculture to members of another. For example, James and Derek could be paired as a composing team and asked to explain Dozens to an audience of hospital administrators. Working together, the two would discover that

all concepts are not cross-cultural; they would also gain practice in translating their ideas into the language of another culture.

Third, as others have documented, peer groups are valuable during revision. At this point, several readers, each from a different discourse community, could indicate which areas of texts cause them confusion. James, Alicia, Janel, and Derek could work together to bring four different world views to bear on each of their texts.

From these peer interactions, basic writer begin to understand that good writing is characterized by more than strict adherence to formalistic algorithims. They begin to see that good writing allows members of one subculture, of one discourse community, to communicate with members of others.

As others have pointed out, we learn through conversation and negotiation, but conversation isn't the top-down monologue that requires teachers to "remediate" students, to "elevate" their language forms and thought processes. It is the open exchange between individuals who have different attachments and different degrees of involvement, individuals who are obtaining knowledge about themselves and how they relate to the rest of society. It is negotiation between people who continue to adjust their positions in the world, who realize there is something of each of us in all of us.

Works Cited

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